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Dorothy L. Espelage

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Dorothy L. Espelage

Ecological Theory: Preventing Youth Bullying, Aggression, and Victimization

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Bronfenbrenner's (1977) classic ecological theory is used as a framework to review the documented risk and protective factors associated with involvement in school-related bullying during childhood and adolescence. Microsystems such as peers (socialization during adolescence), family (violence, lack of parental monitoring), community (exposure to violence), and schools (teacher attitudes, climate) contribute to the rates of bullying perpetrated or experienced by youth. The interaction between components of the microsystem is referred to as the mesosystem, and offers insight into how contexts can exacerbate or buffer experiences for youth who are involved in bullying (e.g., family support can buffer impact of peer victimization). Recommendations are provided for teachers and other adults who work with youth.

In his classic 1977 *American Psychologist* essay, Bronfenbrenner (1977) introduced the ecology of human development model in an attempt to push the field of developmental science forward. He articulated the importance of conducting experimental studies in naturally occurring environments (e.g., schools) alongside controlled laboratory experiments. Over the years, Bronfenbrenner and colleagues offered several reformulations of the ecology model, including the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) and the introduction of chaos theory into this model (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). Numerous aggression scholars resonated with this model, recognizing that youth are situated in systems that have direct, indirect, and dynamic influences on development and behavior.

In the area of school bullying and peer victimization, this model has often been called a social-ecological model and focuses on understanding how individual characteristics of children interact with environmental contexts or systems to

Dorothy L. Espelage is the Edward William Gutgsell and Jane Marr Gutgsell Endowed Professor of Education at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

Correspondence should be addressed to Professor Dorothy L. Espelage, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 226A Education Building, 1310 S. Sixth Street, Champaign, IL 61820. E-mail: espelage@illinois.edu.

promote or prevent victimization and perpetration (Espelage, 2012; Hong & Espelage, 2012). Structures or locations where children have direct contact are referred to as the *microsystem*; these include peers, family, community, and schools. The interaction between components of the microsystem is referred to as the *mesosystem*. An example of a mesosystem is the interrelations between the family and school, such as parental involvement in their child's school. The *exosystem* is the social context with which the child does not have direct contact, but which affects him or her indirectly through the microsystem. Examples would be teacher or staff perceptions of the school environment and opportunities for professional development around bullying, school violence, or school climate. The *macrosystem* level is commonly regarded as a cultural blueprint, which may determine the social structures and activities in the various levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). This level includes organizational, social, cultural, and political contexts, which influence the interactions within other system levels (e.g., state legislation, discipline policies; Bronfenbrenner 1977). The final level of the ecological framework, the *chronosystem* level, includes consistency or change (e.g., historical or life events) of the individual and the environment over the life course (e.g., changes in family structure through divorce, displacement, or death).

Although the social-ecological framework has been applied to child development broadly, its application to school-based bullying has been limited. Thus, in this article I use the social-ecological framework to organize and inform our understanding of bullying perpetration and victimization, but also point to gaps in fully applying this framework.

Individual Characteristics (Microsystem)

Socio-demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, and race/ethnicity, are frequently examined predictors of bullying behavior in school. Many studies report that boys, in general, are more likely to engage in bullying than girls (Espelage, Low, Rao, Hong, & Little, 2014; Nansel et al., 2001; Varjas, Henrich, & Meyers, 2009). During the 1990s, much research supported the notion that girls are socialized to exercise more relational forms of aggression or social bullying, yet boys engage in multiple forms of aggression (Neal, 2007). Despite this, several studies have failed to document significant sex differences in relational aggression or social forms of bullying (Card, Stuckey, Sawalani, & Little, 2008; Crick, Casas, & Mosher, 1997).

What, perhaps, is more important than gender differences is the notion that bullying is a gendered phenomenon where youth are targeted by either same- and other-sex peers in attempts to gain social status (Faris & Felmlee, 2011; Rodkin & Berger, 2008) or to marginalize lesbian, gay, bisexual, and gender-nonconforming youth (Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2008; Robinson & Espelage, 2011). Further, developmental trends indicate that bullying is a precursor to the use of homophobic epithets, which is, in turn, associated with sexual harassment during middle school (Espelage, Basile, & Hamburger, 2012; Espelage & De La Rue, 2013) and is associated with teen dating violence in high school (Espelage, Basile, Low, Anderson, & De La Rue, 2014; Miller et al., 2013).

Like gender, race/ethnicity and immigrant status are demographic variables of interest in this research, but findings have differed across studies. Inconsistent findings are likely a result of variability in sample characteristics and narrow definitions of race/ethnicity. For Hispanic/Latino and Asian youth, immigrant status and language/cultural barriers appear be significant predictors for peer victimization in school (Peguro, 2009; Qin, Way, & Rana, 2008). Collectively, the association between race/ethnicity and bullying is complex and appears to be influenced by the racial/ethnic composition of the classroom, school, or community (Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2001).

Health status and psychological functioning can also place youth at risk for experiences of

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bullying at school (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010). First, studies report that overweight and obese youth of both genders are at increased risk of peer victimization in school (e.g., Adams & Bukowski, 2008). Second, Fekkes, Pijpers, Fredriks, Vogels, and Verloove-Vanhorick (2006) study found that children with depressive symptoms were significantly more likely to be victimized by their peers than children without a history of depression. Finally, disability status is a significant predictor of peer victimization. Students with disabilities have been consistently overrepresented within the bullying dynamic as bullies, victims, and bully-victims (see Rose, Monda-Amaya, & Espelage, 2011, for literature review).

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Family Characteristics (Microsystem)

Consistent parental monitoring has long been recognized as a protective factor (for future victimization or violent perpetration) for youth development (Li, Fiegelman, & Stanton, 2000). Bullies tend to have parents who do not provide adequate supervision or are not actively involved in the lives of their children (Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2000; Georgiou & Fanti, 2010; Low & Espelage, 2013). In other instances, parents may encourage the use of aggressive and retaliatory behaviors. In a recent longitudinal study, exposure to family conflict (sibling aggression, yelling) was associated with greater bully perpetration for a large sample of middle school students (Espelage, Low, Rao, et al., 2013). Further, children who are victims of bullying more often come from families with histories of abuse or inconsistent parenting (Espelage, Low, & De La Rue, 2012; Georgiou & Fanti, 2010).

Supportive familial relations can also buffer the impact of involvement with bully experiences. When victims of bullying have warm relationships with their families, they have more positive outcomes, both emotionally and behaviorally (Bowes, Maughan, Caspi, Moffitt, & Arseneault, 2010; Holt & Espelage, 2007). These positive parent–child interactions provide children with the opportunity to talk about their bullying experiences, and can provide guidance on how to cope with these events. Bowes and colleagues (2010) also found that supportive relationships with siblings could serve to aid in bully-victims' resilience.

Peers (Microsystem)

Bullying and peer victimization rarely takes place in isolated dyadic interactions, but instead often occurs in the presence of other students (Espelage, Holt, & Henkel, 2003). Youth who have friends that bully will bully more (Salmivalli, 2010) and those who have friends who engage in homophobic name-calling will use this language (Birkett & Espelage, 2014). In a recent meta-analysis, Cook and colleagues (2010) found that youth in middle school who bullied other students had greater social status among peers, whereas younger children who bullied were socially rejected. Further, students may serve to perpetuate bullying by actively joining in or passively accepting the bullying behaviors; on the other hand, students can intervene to stop bullying or defend the victim (Espelage, Green, & Polanin, 2012).

Increasingly, school-based bullying prevention programs and social media campaigns are focusing their attention on encouraging bystanders to intervene (e.g., individuals not directly involved in bullying). A growing literature base is emerging that demonstrates the complexity of bystander or defender behaviors. Girls are more likely than boys to intervene on behalf of victims (Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoe, 2008), and youth with high self-efficacy (e.g., perceived ability to intervene), positive attitudes toward the victim, affective empathy, and personal responsibility to intervene (Pozzoli & Gini, 2010) will also intervene. In a recent meta-analysis, researchers found that programs were effective at changing bystander intervening behavior when they included opportunities for youth to discuss reasons why they do not intervene to help victims, develop understanding of others, and

practice effective bystander intervention skills (Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012).

Interactions Among Microsystems (Mesosystem)

Mesosystem encompasses interrelations among two or more microsystems, each containing the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). These interactions are between and among family, peers, and schools. Relations among students, teachers, and administrators matter. There is no doubt that teachers and school officials can influence students' relationships with their peers and their perceptions of the school environment (Lee, 2009). One study found that teachers' positive involvement in their students' academic and social lives significantly decreased students feeling unsafe in their school (Hong & Eamon, 2011). It is also important to note that students are more willing to seek help from teachers or school officials when teachers intervene in students' peer conflicts (Aceves, Hinshaw, Mendoza-Denton, & Page-Gould, 2009). Finally, in a recent multilevel study of over 4,000 middle school students across 35 schools, students reported less bullying, physical fighting, victimization, and greater willingness to intervene in schools where staff members reported that they felt supported by their administration to address bullying in their classrooms and schools (Espelage, Polanin, & Low, 2014).

Another example of a mesosystem structure is the influence of family functioning on peer friendship selection or the interaction between family characteristics and individual attributes. For example, a longitudinal study of middle school youth found that parental monitoring buffered the effects of community violence exposure on bully perpetration and victimization through reduced involvement in deviant behavior (Low & Espelage, 2014). In contrast, impulsivity exacerbated the effects of community violence exposure on bully perpetration by elevating involvement in deviant behavior. This study demonstrates the utility of the ecology model where multiple systems influence each other.

Exosystem

The exosystem comprises aspects of the environment beyond the immediate system containing the individual, including neighborhoods. Because schools are embedded in neighborhoods, an unsafe neighborhood environment can influence bullying behavior due to inadequate adult supervision or negative peer influences. Despite the documented relation between community violence and externalizing behaviors (i.e., conduct problems, delinquency; Bacchini, Esposity & Affuso, 2009; Espelage et al., 2000), there are relatively few studies that have investigated how bullying is influenced by experiences in environments outside of school, such as neighborhoods. There is strong reason to postulate links with both perpetration and victimization, given the disruption in adaptive peer relations and behavioral control that may be associated with features of community violence exposure (Espelage et al., 2000).

Macrosystem

The macrosystem level is regarded as a cultural blueprint that may determine the social structures and activities that occur in the immediate systems level (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Bullying, like other forms of aggression, vary across cultures and contexts (McConville & Cornell, 2003). Sociological theorists assert that school norms can perpetuate inequality, alienation, aggression, and oppression among the students in relation to their race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic background (Leach, 2003). Further, as youth bullying becomes understood within the realm of public health, greater attention is being paid to the impact of state laws on school safety especially for LGBT and sexually diverse youth. At the same time, as the problem moves to the national stage, there is potential for the development of legislation that could be harmful to

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the mental health of youth involved in bullying. Much more research needs to be conducted as new state laws are passed and implemented. Hatzenbuehler and colleagues (in press) describe innovative policy-level research to help inform bullying interventions that consider the unique geographic characteristics that might predict the prevalence and antecedents to mistreatment of LGBT youth. This is just one example of many where the larger culture and political context can impact bullying rates and prevention efforts.

Chronosystem

The final level of the ecological framework, the chronosystem level, includes consistency or change (e.g., historical/life events) of the individual and the environment over the life course (e.g., family structure changes). Studies have documented that changes in life events (e.g., divorce) can result in negative youth outcomes, such as peer aggression (Breivik & Olweus, 2006). According to Hetherington and Elmore (2003), preadolescent children in divorced or remarried families exhibited higher levels of aggression, noncompliance, disobedience, inappropriate classroom conduct, and decreased level of self-regulation.

Summary

Although more comprehensive studies of the ecological model are emerging in the bully research literature, considerable efforts need to be made to conduct investigations that consider the complex interactions within and across the ecological systems. Most of the research in this area has been conducted in a piecemeal fashion, where many of the studies have focused on only one or two structures within the microsystem. Thus, this is a call for research that pays particular attention to examining the other systems and the interactions among them. Much more research needs to be conducted on the chronosystem. More specifically, changes in family structure, changes in school staff and administration, and changes in neighborhoods could contribute to prevalence and type of bullying or aggression displayed among youth.

Implications for Practice

The research reviewed here supports a multisystem approach to bully prevention. At the most basic level, all adults in schools should participate in professional development opportunities to understand bullying, and how to recognize and intervene to support youth. In addition, staff members and students should work together to gain knowledge and skills to reduce bullying and promote prosocial behaviors. But simply working with staff members and students will not bring about the real changes in bullying behaviors. School staff and administration must partner with others to impact the ecology. First, schools should include parents on their school safety committees and work together to coordinate *parent nights* to involve other parents, providing transportation, babysitting, and food. Newsletters and e-mail blasts should also be used to communicate with parents and community members. Second, many schools have partnered with community agencies and faith-based organizations to address bullying and to make sure youth and their families know where they can seek help. Some schools hold events on the topic of bullying at family recreational centers, museums, and street festivals. Third, school administrators should work closely with local media to highlight their bully-prevention initiatives and to promote community involvement. This would be particularly useful during October of each year, for Bully Awareness Month. Finally, youth leaders should also be actively engaged in bully prevention efforts to create effective bystander intervention.

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